



Connecticut School Transportation Association

Transportation Committee Public Hearing

February 9, 1015

HB 5229 An Act Requiring Seat Belts in Newly Purchased School Buses

My name is Leslie Sheldon and I am the Operations Manager for All-Star Transportation, a school bus company located in Waterbury, CT. I am also the President of the Connecticut School Transportation Association (COSTA), which is a trade association comprised of owners and operators of school buses, school transportation vehicles and other associate members. Together, our companies operate more than 8,000 school buses and student transportation vehicles that transport nearly 500,000 children to and from school safely each day.

I am here to speak to you about the concerns that our association has with HB 5229, a bill that would require any new school bus purchased in the State of Connecticut to be equipped with seat belts. I would like to give you some background on school bus transportation. The U.S. Department of Transportation states that it is a fact that "school buses are the safest mode of transportation for getting children back and forth to school." School children are about 50 times more likely to arrive at school alive if they take the bus than if they drive themselves or ride with friends. But did you also know that your child is much safer riding the bus than being driven by you? The Department of Transportation states that the average number of national student fatalities during normal school travel hours is 58% by traveling with teen drivers, 23% traveling by adult drivers and 1% traveling by school bus. School buses are designed to be safer than passenger vehicles in avoiding crashes and preventing injury.

I would like to share the findings of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) on school bus safety. We have seat belts in passenger cars. Why don't we have them on school buses? Large school buses are heavier and distribute crash forces differently than do passenger cars and light trucks. Because of these differences, the crash forces experienced by occupants of buses are much less than that experienced by occupants of passenger cars and light trucks or vans. NHTSA decided the best way to provide crash protection to passengers of large school buses is through a concept called "compartmentalization". This requires that the interior of large buses provide occupant protection such that children are protected without the need to buckle up. Through compartmentalization, occupant crash protection is provided by a protective envelope consisting of strong, closely-spaced seats that have energy-absorbing seat backs. In 2010 the Federal Department of Transportation required that height of the seat backs in school buses

be increased by four inches to ensure better standards for compartmentalization and student safety.

School bus crash data show that compartmentalization has been effective at protecting school bus passengers. NHTSA's 2002 Report to Congress found that the addition of lap belts did not improve occupant protection for the severe frontal impacts that were studied for that report. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) have come to similar conclusions. The NTSB concluded in a 1987 study of schools bus crashes that most fatalities and injuries occurred because occupant seating positions were in direct line with the crash forces. NTSB stated that seat belts would not have prevented most of the serious injuries and fatalities from occurring in school bus crashes. In 1989, the NAS also stated that the funds used to purchase and maintain seat belts might be better spent on other school bus safety programs and devices that could save more lives and reduce more injuries.

Proposed Act HB 5229 does not indicate the kind of seat belt that will be installed by the manufacturer. There are two kinds of belts used in school buses, one being a lap belt and the other being a three point harness. There is a cost factor to consider for requiring either system to be installed on school buses with the three point harness system being the most costly. Also, there is a cost factor to maintain and replace worn equipment in future years.

Things to consider before implementing this law would be:

- Seat belt equipped buses could potentially decrease the amount of seats that are usable on the school bus. The current statues state that students of all ages and sizes may sit three to a seat. This is usually not feasible with Middle School and High School students. A seventy two (72) passenger bus becomes a forty four (44) passenger bus with two (2) students per seat. The seats being manufactured with the three point harness built into the seat require the seat to be thicker than the seat without belts. This will contribute to the number of seats on a school bus.
- The current language of the bill states all new school buses purchased in the state will be equipped with seat belts. Many school districts have phase in equipment language in their current contracts. An example of this would be a school district which requires one hundred (100) buses to service their transportation needs. The contract could stipulate that each year of the five year contract, the Contractor is required to update the fleet with twenty (20) new school buses. This way the replacement cost of a fleet is spread out over five (5) years. So if you were in year four (4) of the contract, only a forty (40) buses in the fleet would be seatbelt equipped by the end of the contract. How does the school district or the Contractor determine which students ride the buses that are seat belt equipped? Perhaps discrimination suits could be brought be parents of those that are not in seat belt equipped buses? Will there be liability issues to a school district if an accident occurs in a school bus that was not equipped with seat belts while others in the district were equipped with them?

- School bus drivers have the daily challenge of safely transporting students while navigating our roadways and the public that uses them. Will the bus driver be responsible for assuring that students are wearing belts and doing so properly? The driver cannot get out of his/her seat to assist children with the belts. Will the law make it mandatory for students to wear the belts and who will enforce this? The driver cannot see if students have the belts on properly from the driver seat. Will monitors (an additional cost) be required on school buses to ensure seat belts are being used and being used properly?
- Seat belts was a hot topic in the 2010 legislative session which resulted in a fund that was created to help towns that wanted to equip their school bus fleets with seat belts. To date, no one has used this fund or installed seat belts per contract requirements. The State has moved this money into the General Fund.

COSTA does not object to the use of three point harness seat belts on school buses. It does object to any additional duties and responsibilities that could be put on a school bus driver. We feel that the current school buses are the safest transportation for children to get to and from school each day. We feel that everything that I have just mentioned be carefully analyzed and taken into consideration before a law is put into place so that passenger safety is not jeopardized, unnecessary cost is placed on school districts and added responsibility is placed on school bus drivers.

I would also like to address a few more proposed bills that have to do with school bus transportation.

HB 5451 An Act Concerning Cameras on Vehicles Transporting Children with Special Needs and SB 491 An Act Requiring Camera Video Systems on School Transportation Vehicles Used for Special Needs Children

COSTA would like to see both of these proposed bills define the language to vehicles with less than fifteen (15) passengers. Special needs cover a wide spectrum of students and most school districts main stream as many as possible onto large school buses. As written, these bills would mandate that all school buses have recording devices on them. COSTA feels that this should be mandated by individual school districts, not by State law. Ultimately it is the school district that will fund this. Laws should then be created if this is mandated as to how long the video should be kept on file, who views that video and policies put in place by each school district administering it.

HB 6322 And Act Studying Measures to Prevent Violence and Terror on School Buses

COSTA supports this bill. Currently there are no mandates for training of school bus drivers and professionals for violence and terror on school buses other than any programs supplied independently by individual school bus companies and districts. The tragedy in Sandy Hook,

CT has set the stage for training for safety training of students in schools. Why not include school buses in this?

Thank you for your time and I would be happy to answer any questions.